

On Top of Everything

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REVIEW OF BYRON: CHILD OF PASSION, FOOL OF FAME by Benita Eisler.

Once more upon the waters! yet once more! And the waves bound beneath me as a steed That knows his rider.

On 25 April 1816, Byron set out from Dover for the Continent, never to return to England. Four days earlier, he had signed the separation papers that put an end to what Benita Eisler calls 'one of the most infamously wretched marriages in history'. Annabella Milbanke – intellectual, religious and marriageable – was very different from Byron's other women. He looked to her to rescue him from debt and the persisting attentions of Caroline Lamb, and blamed her for not saving him from his sinful relationship with his half-sister Augusta when she had the opportunity. In the autumn of 1812 she had turned down his first proposal, and the following summer Augusta came to London in need of Byron's financial help. Lady Oxford had recently ended her affair with the poet and returned to her husband, and Byron could not resist the 'irreplaceable joy' offered by his sister. In an account written after the marriage collapsed, Annabella claims that, within hours of their wedding in January 1815, Byron told her that her previous refusal to marry him had damned him, and he had only married her now to exact his revenge.

Augusta played a peculiar role throughout the courtship and marriage. After they were engaged, Byron repeatedly postponed a visit to Annabella's parents on the pretext that he was waiting for his lawyer. During this period Augusta corresponded with Annabella more often than Byron did. After the marriage, her role continued to be ambiguous. The newly-weds spent three weeks alone together at Seaham, on the Yorkshire coast. During this time Annabella wrote regularly to her sister-in-law, with intimate details about their sex life, which was busy, despite Byron's heavy drinking. Augusta then invited them to stay with her at Six Mile Bottom, near Newmarket. Eisler speculates that it was this visit – so soon after their wedding – rather than Annabella's refusal to marry earlier that proved fatal to the Byrons' marriage. The unwelcome third party in this uncomfortable ménage was not Byron's sister but his wife. The Byrons then moved to London, where for ten days they lived together in relative happiness until Augusta descended. Before long she had become Annabella's 'full-fledged rival' and was asked to leave. For the remaining months of their marriage Byron was more or less the model of an abusive husband. After the birth of their daughter in December he tried to rape his wife four times in the space of a fortnight, until the servants took to locking the door to her room. He tried to evict her from their house; and she finally fled north to her parents after he had dragged her from the drawing room in the presence of Augusta and his cousin, George Byron, quite possibly with the intention of killing her. Alcoholic, frighteningly destructive and arguably insane, the poet had reached the nadir of his life.

The separation was a protracted and messy business, as Byron continued to protest his innocence and refused to sign the papers. His wife and her family eventually had to resort to blackmail to persuade him to settle out of court. Threatened with a sinister 'unnamed allegation', he capitulated. Most of his property was seized by the bailiffs. His reputation was in tatters and he was in danger of being prosecuted for sodomy and incest. He was forced to leave the country, just as he had been when he embarked on his first European tour seven years previously. On that occasion the cause had been a chorister two years younger than Byron who had been his lover at Cambridge. John Edleston (commemorated in his poetry as 'Thyrza') moved to London when his voice broke to take up a position as a clerk in a mercantile firm. They hadn't seen each other for a while, when Edleston wrote

to Byron, asking for help with finding a new job. Byron, now legally adult, was worried not only that his passion for Edleston would revive, but that he could be prosecuted were their relationship exposed. 'To any contemporary of Byron's,' Eisler writes, 'the urgency of his flight would have held no mystery.' This is perhaps a little overdramatic; but the second time he went away, the mess he was fleeing was all too real.

There was something wilfully self-destructive about the way Byron had got himself into it. He had a crippling tendency to passivity, happily giving way, for example, to Lady Melbourne – Caroline Lamb's mother-in-law and Annabella Milbanke's aunt – 'the Spider', doyenne of Whig society and arch manipulator who engineered his marriage. He was all too happy to let others do things for him, and would rarely act on his own initiative to change an unsatisfactory situation, unless he had no other choice. Eisler describes the 'familiar cycle' of a Byron relationship as 'pursuit, persuasion, ending in passive withdrawal'.

Another problem was that he 'needed to come first with everyone he loved – or even liked – and would adjust his social persona accordingly'. The result was a mass of contradictory behaviour. He would revile Caroline Lamb to those of his friends who didn't like her, while swearing undying love in his letters to her. The extraordinary lengths to which he went to suit his behaviour and manner to his environment meant that nobody, himself included, had a very clear sense of who he was. One consequence of trying to make everyone like him was to make a lot of people dislike him, but in a way this suited him, too. If depending on others to define his identity made it ever more nebulous, perhaps incurring displeasure would somehow solidify it. And so he sought approval and censure simultaneously. His urge to write poetry grew in part out of his ontological anxiety: Byron's 'real personality' was not manifested in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, but the poem was at least a mask that everyone could see him wearing.

The three activities to which Byron committed himself with any real vigour (before the final Greek expedition) were swimming, sex and poetry. His exploits in the water are recorded by Eisler: down the Thames from Lambeth to Blackfriars; across the Hellespont, famously recalled in *Don Juan* – 'As once (a feat on which ourselves we prided)/Leander, Mr Ekenhead and I did'; racing various English officers around Venice; plunging into the sea while Trelawny cremated Shelley's body.

Eisler's portrait of Byron is not going to prompt a radical reassessment of the poet, but she does write in more detail about his sex life than any previous biographer. As the blurb on the jacket would have it: 'Here also are the first in-depth portraits of the women – and men – whom Byron loved.' Exactly what it meant for Byron to love someone is far from clear, but just about everyone he slept with or claimed to love is faithfully catalogued. His first sexual experience was, famously, at the hands of his Presbyterian nursemaid, May Gray, when he was nine years old. There followed exploits with his fellow Harrovians; the chorister Edleston at Cambridge; countless whores in London; sailors at Falmouth; boys in Albania and the 'buggery shops' of Constantinople; his servants (male and female) at Newstead Abbey; Caroline Lamb; an Italian opera singer; Lady Oxford; his sister Augusta; his wife; actresses at Drury Lane where he was a manager of the theatre; Claire Clairmont, Mary Shelley's half-sister; the chambermaid in Ostend on whom, according to Dr Polidori, Byron 'fell like a thunderbolt' on arriving on the Continent in April 1816; innumerable strangers of all classes at the *ridotto*, a regular venue for masked orgies in Venice, a city he described as 'the Sea-Sodom'; a host of Venetian hostesses and their sisters and mothers; the Countess Teresa Gamba Guiccioli, Byron's soi-disant 'last attachment'; and many more. These encounters resulted in a number of children – including one legitimate daughter and possibly one incestuous one – and various bouts of venereal disease (acquired almost exclusively from whores; he wrote to Hobhouse of an infection contracted in Venice that it was the 'first case of gonorrhoea I have not paid for').

Carried away by his satyriasis, Eisler is keen on the idea that Byron was, on top of everything else, a practising paedophile. She bases this theory on a flimsy conglomeration of circumstantial evidence. When he was 18, a French procuress offered him 'something ... in her business more than ordinary' that 'required some caution and circumspection'. Eisler asks: 'Who can doubt that her "more than ordinary" offer was the provision of very young children for the pleasure of her clients?' – which demonstrates either far too much or far too little imagination. She accepts without question the unreliable testimony of Byron's estranged wife that he was discovered by Lady Oxford forcing himself on her 11-year-old daughter. There is, on the other hand, concrete evidence that Byron chose not to have sex with very young children. On the first European tour, in 1810, Byron and Hobhouse were offered a 12-year-old 'brought here to be deflowr'd – but B would not,' Hobhouse wrote in his diary. Eisler dismisses this as exceptional, reminding us that 'the child's age was the same as that of Teresa Macri, whom Byron had offered to buy from her mother.' This ignores the fact that when Teresa's mother accepted Byron's offer, he reneged, later writing to Hobhouse that 'the old woman ... was mad enough to imagine I was going to marry the girl.' Eisler takes this to mean that his intentions were less honourable, but perhaps he never intended to 'buy' the child at all. Her mother, like so many people who encountered Byron, may have made the mistake of taking him seriously.

Others who met him were surprised that he was 'in everything ... unlike the characters of his own Childe Harold – Giaour', as a young American student, George Ticknor, was to note on meeting him in 1815. 'I have seen Lord Byron,' Lady Blessington recorded in her diary on 1 April 1823, 'and am disappointed.' It is hardly surprising that people should have confused the poet with his heroes. After the success of the first two cantos of the *Pilgrimage*, he churned out the 'Eastern Tales' with enviable ease, writing *The Bride of Abydos* in under a week and *The Corsair* in ten days – it sold out in an edition of ten thousand on the day it was published. The 'Tales' are more plot-driven than the *Pilgrimage*, but they all feature a hero on the Childe Harold model. The angst-ridden adolescent brooding his way round a decaying Europe is developed into various dashing and impossibly sexy outlaws acting out the poet's fantasies and those of his readers. Conrad the Corsair, 'that man of loneliness and mystery', is typical. Having got wind that the Turkish Pacha intends to attack him on his 'Pirate's isle', he launches a pre-emptive assault, which involves the dubious tactic of infiltrating the Turkish palace during a banquet, disguised as a dervish, while his men set fire to the fleet. The Pacha realises the 'Dervise' is not what he seems, and commands his men to 'seize – cleave him – slay him now!' But:

Up rose the Dervise with that burst of light,
Nor less his change of form appall'd the sight:
Up rose that Dervise – not in saintly garb,
but like a warrior bounding on his barb,
Dash'd his high cap, and tore his robe away –
Shone his mail'd breast, and flash'd his sabre's ray!

Things go wrong for Conrad, however, because he loses valuable time rescuing the Pacha's harem from the burning city. The battle is lost, and the Pacha imprisons him 'in the high chamber of his highest tower', but he is rescued by Gulnare, the Pacha's favourite concubine, who fell in love with him when he saved her. In contrast to Gulnare – who is very similar to Conrad, cannot bear to be enslaved and kills the Pacha to facilitate their escape – Medora, Conrad's perfect wife, stays at home worrying about him.

In the poem's dedication to Thomas Moore, Byron makes a rhetorical apology for having 'deviated into the gloomy vanity of "drawing from self"'. Eisler says he was here acknowledging that '*The Corsair* was the most autobiographical of his poems.' But to believe this is to comply with self-mythologising that she does such a good job of debunking in her graphic account of Byron's life.

Everything he said about the autobiographical nature of his pre-exile poetry was, in the most generous analysis, disingenuous. To write of Childe Harold that 'none did love him' was to excuse himself for failing those who did love him, starting with his mother: a lonely and insecure woman whose husband had reduced her to poverty before abandoning her with a small child, overweight and overbearing, she was a source of embarrassment to her son. The genius of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* was the irresistibly seductive narrating voice that appeared to be, in Scott's words, 'the novelty of an author speaking in his own person'. Caroline Lamb believed in Childe Harold, and suffered for taking Byron at his word.

Eisler's biography is divided into three parts. The second, 'Fame and Infamy', begins in 1811 with Byron's return to England after the travels with Hobhouse that gave rise to *Childe Harold*; it ends with his final departure from England in 1816: 'He had cast off ties of love, enmity and debt, along with the sanctions of the responsible and respectable. Travelling light, he embraced the mobility of the exile. Buoyant with freedom, his poetry would soar.' Far from freeing himself, he had already taken steps towards his next messy entanglement by sleeping with Claire Clairmont. But the best of his poetry was yet to come.

After leaving England, he became increasingly concerned with the extent to which he'd been eclipsed by his reputation. In *Manfred* (1817) he wrestles with the Byronic hero of the 'Eastern Tales' and kills him off: 'Yet, see, he mastereth himself and makes/His torture tributary to his will'; 'Old man!'tis not so difficult to die.' And some way before the end of Canto 4 of the *Pilgrimage* (1818), Childe Harold evaporates, disappearing even from the description of his disappearance:

But where is he, the Pilgrim of my song,
The being who upheld it through the past?
Methinks he cometh late and tarries long.
He is no more – these breathings are his last;
His wanderings done, his visions ebbing fast,
And he himself as nothing: – if he was
Aught but a phantasy, and could be class'd
With forms which live and suffer – let that Pass –
His shadow fades away into Destruction's mass,
Which gathers shadow, substance, life and all
That we inherit in its mortal shroud,
And spreads the dim and universal pall
Through which all things grow phantoms.

Mazeppa (1819) can be read as a metaphor for Byron's poetic development. The eponymous hero, one of the officers of Charles XII's army, describes how in his youth, as punishment for an inappropriate sexual relationship, he was strapped naked to the back of a wild horse which was whipped away and ran until it was almost dead. In the framing narrative, before he begins to tell his story, he is introduced to us grooming his horse as his first act after battle. The poem ends with the bathetic observation that 'the king' – Mazeppa's audience – 'had been an hour asleep.' Pope, Byron's favourite poet, wrote in his *Essay on Criticism*:

'Tis more to guide, than spur the Muse's steed;
Restrain his fury, than provoke his speed.

Byron had curbed the excesses of the 'Eastern Tales' – which, though fun, are a little ridiculous – and discovered the voice that sealed his genius. That he had always had a talent for comedy is clear from his letters, but he was reluctant, after the success of *Childe Harold*, to use a comic voice in his poetry. This changed with *Beppo* (1817), a Venetian comedy of manners in ottava rima, which marked the beginning of his last, great phase. *Don Juan* will not let the reader take it seriously, and as such it is Byron's most serious poem; we may find the 'Eastern Tales' ridiculous, but *Don Juan* finds itself

ridiculous. Byron had discovered a voice that is consistently inconsistent, riddled with irony and self-contradiction, and always brings itself down to earth at the moment it appears doomed to teeter into sentimentality:

They look upon each other, and their eyes
Gleam in the moonlight, and her white arm clasps
Round Juan's head, and his around hers lies
Half buried in the tresses which it grasps.
She sits upon his knee and drinks his sighs,
He hers, until they end in broken gasps;
And thus they form a group that's quite antique,
Half naked, loving, natural, and Greek.

Byron wasn't showing the same kind of control in his life that he was in his poetry. Claire Clairmont bore their daughter in January 1817, when he had long since grown tired of her after the cavorting and sexual tension of the *Frankenstein* summer on Lake Geneva in 1816. Despite Shelley's best efforts, Byron refused to see Claire. He took charge of the child, Allegra, and neglected her in a convent, where she died at the age of five in April 1822. Byron moved to Venice at the end of 1816, and threw himself into a series of 'nocturnal olympiads'. He wrote to Murray:

There's a whore on my right
For I rhyme best at Night
When a C—t is tied close to my inkstand.

But sex and poetry were not enough, even though he engaged in both with committed intensity (to write a canto of *Don Juan* rarely took him more than a month, and often as little as ten days or a week).

Byron composed the bulk of the poem while he was involved with Teresa Guiccioli. The relationship began in Venice in April 1819 and continued, fitfully and peripatetically, until he left for Greece in July 1823. Teresa's family, the Gambas, were closely involved in the Carbonari, the secret society founded to oppose Napoleonic rule in Naples. After the Congress of Vienna established Austrian predominance in Italy they directed their energies towards national independence. The masonic rituals and elaborate hierarchy of the organisation only increased its appeal for Byron. In August 1820 he was made chief of the Cacciatori Americani, one of the three sections of the Ravenna branch. The Piedmont uprising of February 1821 was a failure, and in the face of impending arrest, Byron and the Gambas decamped to Tuscany. In Pisa, Byron joined Shelley, Trelawny and other expatriates, with whom he passed the time playing billiards and shooting pistols. After Shelley's death, the Pisan circle dispersed; Byron and the Gambas, under Papal proscription and increasingly unwelcome throughout most of the peninsula because of their revolutionary involvements, had to leave Tuscany. Genoa was the only safe place left in Italy, so to Genoa they went. But Byron's thoughts were turning again to Greece, where rebels had been fighting against Turkish occupation since 1821.

In stanza 73 of Canto 2 of *Childe Harold*, Byron asks of Greece: 'Who now shall lead thy scatter'd children forth?' On a fragment of manuscript now at Yale, this question is repeated five times, and each time it is clearly answered: 'Byron'. In 1809 he had fantasised about liberating Greece: in 1823 he tried to do something about it. Cornered in Genoa, tired of Teresa and anxious about his debts, Byron was almost ready to move on. A delegation from the London Greek Committee stopped in Genoa in April 1823 on their way to Greece. Fired with their enthusiasm, Byron began his preparations. He embarked on the brig *Hercules* on 13 July, but had to wait three days for a favourable wind. He lingered in Cephalonia for nearly five months, reaching Missolonghi, on the Greek mainland, on 5 January 1824. For three and a half months he wrangled with the London Greek Committee, intransigent Greek rebels and a gang of incompetent doctors about finance, strategy,

leadership and his health. He fell ill on 9 April and died ten days later, after a debilitating course of bleeding. A post-mortem that made up for in zeal what it lacked in skill left him unrecognisable: when his body was returned to England, Hobhouse identified him by his deformed foot.

Byron had taken the manuscript of Canto 17 of *Don Juan* with him across the Adriatic, but wrote no more. Although the poem is technically unfinished, there is a sense in which it is completed. Aurora Raby, not burdened with a tyrannical husband, a 'piratical papa' or an empire – unlike Juan's previous lovers, Catherine the Great among them – embodies the possibility for Juan of forsaking his Lothario lifestyle and settling down like his 18th-century forebears, Tom Jones and Roderick Random. But at the end of Canto 16, he encounters in a corridor in the middle of the night 'her frolic Grace – Fitz-Fulke' (the Duchess rhymes with 'bulk'). In the 14th and final stanza of Canto 17, Juan is the last guest to come down to breakfast, after a sleepless night, 'wan and worn, with eyes that hardly brooked/The light that through the Gothic windows shone'. Earlier in the poem, the narrator jokes that he's not sure whether to condemn Juan to Hell, as the myth dictates, or to the hell of marriage. To suggest that marriage holds out salvation in a poem of Byron's would of course be daft, except that it represents closure: 'All tragedies are finished by a death,/All comedies are ended by a marriage.' *Manfred* is a tragedy, and it ends with the protagonist's death; *Don Juan* is a comedy, and should end with the hero's marriage. Manfred craves 'oblivion', part of his misery is that he believes himself to be one 'Who is undying', and the hell that Byron's Don Juan is condemned to is a life of endless repetition, without closure. The poem stops at a point that indicates it could go on for ever. The hero can only be Don Juan, unable to escape either himself or his reputation.

The expedition to Greece was the last of Byron's attempts at a fresh start. It could have been the greatest failure of all – except that the one thing he had to offer was celebrity, and what better way to turn the eyes of the world to Greece than by dying there? In the words of Harold Nicolson, writing in 1924: 'Lord Byron accomplished nothing at Missolonghi except his own suicide; but by that single act of heroism he secured the liberation of Greece.'

The last entry in his journal is a poem, 'On This Day I Complete My 36th Year'. Written on his birthday, 22 January, in Missolonghi, it heavily influenced the public perception of his last days when it was published in the autumn of 1824:

Seek out – less often sought than found –
 A soldier's grave, for thee the best;
Then look around, and choose thy ground,
 And take thy rest.

Eisler's final chapter is called 'Afterlife', and deals, briefly, with Byron's posthumous reputation – it includes the excruciating claim that 'Byron can sound like the first rap artist.' As a figure, Byron is open to an astonishing number of readings. Eisler's is something like the 200th biographical study to have been published in the 175 years since his death. It is a lively read – Byron led a lively life – but the poems are discussed almost parenthetically: she points out biographical sources and parallels without giving any real sense of what caused Byron's 'lava of the imagination' to erupt.